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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: U.S.-CHINA-TAIWAN RELATIONS

Summary: Taiwan's major Chinese-language dailies focused news coverage August 26 on the rapid spread of the H1N1 virus in Taiwan and the Taiwan government's plan to cope with the threat of the epidemic; and on the on-going relief efforts and plans for reconstruction in typhoon-stricken southern Taiwan. In terms of editorials and commentaries, an op-ed piece in the pro-independence "Liberty Times" linked the largest-ever military exercise launched by China's People's Liberation Army recently with a series of incidents happening in Taiwan in the wake of Typhoon Morakot and concluded that President Ma Ying-jeou's 'inaction' will likely expose Taiwan to an unnecessary military crisis. A column in the conservative, pro-unification, English-language "China Post," however, said cross-Straits ties may be speeding up in the wake of Typhoon Morakot. End summary.

A) "China-U.S-Taiwan [Relations] -- Starting from the People's Liberation Army's Unprecedented Large-scale [Military] Exercise"

Yun Cheng, a freelancer focusing on Taiwan issues, opined in the pro-independence "Liberty Times" [circulation: 700,000] (8/26):

"... For Ma Ying-jeou, [all he needs to do] is to endure the [criticisms] about his poor performance in handling the response to Typhoon Morakot for a few days. But the biggest difference lies in the fact that Ma's 'inaction' has resulted in the U.S. military's proactive offer to show its presence [in Taiwan]. Also, while the U.S. transport aircraft and mine-removing helicopters appeared in the airspace of Taiwan with 'subdued markings', the CVN-73 aircraft carrier of the [U.S.] Seventh Fleet was actually not far from [those aircraft]. It appeared that the international media also rushed to come to Taiwan as if they were expecting something big to happen.
...

"China was conducting its largest-ever [military] drill codenamed 'Kuayue ('Stride') 2009' on August 11, mobilizing [troops from] four military zones -- Shenyang, Lanzhou, Jinan and Guangzhou -- for nearly two months, and the drill was held in the vicinity of some controversial areas such as North Korea, the South China Sea and Afghanistan. ... As a result, the USS George Washington had assumed a defensive posture: it departed its home port in Yokosuka, Japan on August 10 and made a [port] call on Manila, the first time in over thirteen years. Also, the USS Nimitz, which is harbored far away in San Diego, started a journey westward in late July [in an attempt] to replace [the USS George Washington].

"Just when both the United States and China were 'interacting in a ritual-like manner,' several unusual incidents occurred in Taiwan one after another: A [Taiwan] former chief of the general staff arrived in Beijing for a visit on August 8, just when Typhoon Morakot hit [southern Taiwan]; on August 9, five sections of the undersea cables near Taiwan were interrupted, and the U.S. Pacific Command twice took the initiative to express its willingness to provide rescue assistance [to Taiwan]; while other countries started to offer rescue assistance [to Taiwan] on August 10, the [KMT] authorities welcomed China's assistance; China's People's Liberation Army [PLA] launched its military drill on August 11, and Taiwan's

Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued an 'emergency' cable declining [rescue] supplies and teams from other countries; on August 12, six sections of [Taiwan's] undersea cables were damaged, and China turned down a port call by a naval vessel from Japan's Self-Defense Force; the situation began to change after Taiwan's premier changed his story and denied that [Taiwan] had rejected foreign assistance. On August 13, several media outlets in Taiwan suggested that Taiwan learn from the PLA's experience in conducting rescue missions; U.S. AID personnel arrived in Taiwan on August 14, and PLA Major General Luo Yuan urged Taiwan to review its alliance with the United States before [both sides of the Taiwan Strait] establish a military confidence-building mechanism; [President] Ma called for a national security meeting; a U.S. C-130 aircraft landed in Taiwan on August 16; U.S. helicopters arrived in Taiwan on August 17, and the State Department denied that it needed to inform China [about sending military aircraft to Taiwan]. On August 18, China's Taiwan Affairs Office reiterated its willingness to provide helicopters [to Taiwan]; U.S. congressmen visited Taiwan via a military aircraft on August 20; the USS Nimitz arrived in Yokosuka on August 24.

"... Regardless of the reasons and motives behind it, the incredible 'consecutive inaction' by the Ma administration and China's 'timely' declaration of its willingness [to provide assistance to Taiwan] alone would be sufficient to allow the PLA to seize the opportunity to break through [Taiwan's] military command and control and land on Taiwan in the name of [providing] 'humanitarian' [assistance]. Once such a precedent is set, the U.S.-Japan security alliance may be damaged in an instant due to an 'emergency situation' happening in areas near Japan and thus turn the sixty-year-old strategic balance in East Asia upside down! When [one] recalls the first week in the wake of Typhoon Morakot, [one may find that] even if the Ma administration were not regarded as plotting with Beijing, it is still possible that its aloofness and hasty action will result in a

'misjudgment' by the United States, Japan and China and consequently expose Taiwan to an unnecessary military crisis. The U.S. military's eagerness to 'show itself' [in Taiwan] must be [seen] as a 'preventative' [step]. ..."

B) "Cross-Strait Ties May Be Speeding up"

Columnist Frank Ching wrote in the conservative, pro-unification, English-language "China Post" [circulation: 30,000] (8/26):

"... But this month, for the first time, American military aircraft returned to Taiwan and conducted joint operations with the Taiwan military -- the first such joint military operations since 1979. Remarkably, China did not object. Beijing is extremely sensitive to anything that smacks of official relations between the United States and Taiwan, which it claims as part of its territory. But this time, it was conspicuously silent. This silence is a reflection of the profound changes that have taken place in relations among China, Taiwan and the United States since Ma assumed the presidency last year. ... Typhoon Morakot has not only highlighted the changes in the delicate relationship involving Taipei, Beijing and Washington: It may even have the effect of speeding them up.

"President Ma, who apologized for his administration's handling of the natural disaster, said that the army would shift its focus to disaster prevention and rescue, adding that Taiwan's enemy was not necessarily the Chinese across the Taiwan Strait, but could be nature. He also said his government would reduce the number of Black Hawk military helicopters it had ordered from the United States and buy heavy lift helicopters instead to enhance its ability to conduct disaster relief and humanitarian missions. All this, no doubt, was music to China's ears. While rejecting China's helicopter offer, Taiwan did accept other aid from the mainland, particularly pre-fabricated units to house those who have lost their homes. ..."

"Taipei and Beijing have both talked about signing a peace agreement. Negotiations on such a pact will no doubt be sensitive and prolonged. But if both sides publicly indicate a change in the primary mission of the military, even without a reunification of [sic] the use of force by China, it could go far to improving the environment for talks to end 60 years of hostility across the Taiwan Strait."

